

СТАРИЯТ ПЛОВДИВ

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THE OLD TOWN PLOVDIV

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STEPS
IN THE OLD TOWN

There is a house in this town
founded on top of other towns
and its door is calling you. A
door forever closed for you, a
door implacably inaccessible
for the living, imperceptible for

the dead, a door which is an illusion for a meeting with your irrevocable "I" somewhere back in the past. You sit sometimes on its threshold and the mysterious voices of church bells draw near you once again, and so does the wind moaning in the drains, and the harsh sound of the hooter of somebody's car led astray in the fog, and the deserted streets with the houses as if they were the scenery of a stage without actors, with their roofs following

each other like steps, with the pale faces of the street lamps, with the huddled public gardens — like the breasts of heroes adorned with innumerable leaves, the sign of their bravery. At this place where everything looks to the casual glance like a promenade for tourists rather than reality, time steps on tip-toe. It keeps on wavering its flame among the spiders' webs in the air, bent under the weight of eight thousand years in which all the stages of human civilisation

merge inseparably and thus create that feeling of eternity which is our strength as human beings.

Every flutter here is a revelation, the unsuspected presence of somebody. Ancient Hebrus is still flowing ever so lonely and quietly in this endless poem of breathtaking spiritual elevation, the very Hebrus that Alkaïos, the poet, addressed thus: „You, most beautiful among the rivers, you, that plunge in the sea not far from Enos and

carry your waves along the Thracian land." It seems that under the inaccessible proud rocks of Nebet tepe the old quai is still showing white and so are the numerous rafts, boats and ships, heavily loaded with tar, grain and cattle, ready to set sail for Adrianople. Above it behind the fortress walls, exquisite in their attire, Thracian notables show off their glory under the impressive colonnade of seasons. Whiter than snow, the horses bear on their sweaty backs the

exultation of many victories at a time when even Sumerian culture is still quite far from its brilliance.

Who can say where all this has begun and where it ends?

Could you ever have a real glimpse on the old chronicles of Pompeius Trogus on the seisure of the town by the father of Alexander of Macedon, Philip II Amyant, in 342-341 B.C.? Is it possible to find in the annals of so many other world-famous historians

anything about the defence of the town against the Celts and the Goths, and Attila's hordes, against avars and petchenegs, the whole truth about those times of trouble under the ruins of which Plovdiv has come to life again and again, ever more magnificent in the manliness to defend itself? Is it not for that reason that Lucian of Samosata in the much quoted dialogue between Hermes and Heracles has called it "the biggest and most beautiful of all towns"? And is it not for

that reason that in the indifferent movement of the hour-glasses where it seems that each day brings forward a new age, in the strange blend between legend and reality, the man of today feels as if stepping into a temple with a dome reaching the sky?

And whichever way you turn it is always the same, the three hills of the independent Thracian leaders, always the same, the town of the Pythic games with the splendid sacrifices, with the sweet sound

of the flutes, with the songs and the hymns dedicated to Apollo. This is Plovdiv of so many pagan cults, of the temples to Dionysus, Apollo and Artemis. Plovdiv of the Alexandrian and Kendrian games, the town which in 46 A.D. was turned by the Roman centurions into the metropolis of the province Thracia with a Senate which could mint its own coins, levy taxes and duties, and which was raised to the status of an inaccessible citadel of their

Empire by the spearmen of Justinian the Great another five hundred years later. This is Plovdiv starting from Eumolpia and Pulpudeva through Philippopolis and Trimontium to Flavia, Ulpia and Phelibe but always the same in all its transformations. There is some inscrutable mystery in your presence in this stream of centuries with their partiality, where the quiverings of human consciousness run one after another and the joy of over-

coming them embraces the walls, peeling under the sunlight and the rain, endowing them with soul.

And like the wind that comes always back along its own orb, so with the years, before the stunned Romaic gaze, here is once again the Protobulgarian cavalry climbing the fortress wall with thunder. The pagan flag of the fearful Khan Krum is floating above the Round Tower in a sacred union with eternity which makes reality itself seem

implausible. And once again the chime of the bell of the oldest church in Plovdiv "Sveti Constantine i Elena" resounds in space to our amazement as if it has never stopped echoing. It has emerged from the distance to herald the beginning of a new era in which a young nationality is yet to prove its right of existence.

In the staggering race with eternity the heretic Vassilii Vrach has set off for his Golgotha amidst the Romaic abuse. The sound of the steps

of the Emperor Elexius Comnenus and Eustratius, Bishop of Nicaea, have died away in the high insidious palaces of the town while above the embrasures, along with the song of the the birds, the heretic oration has flowed ever so threateningly. The *knights of Louis VII* have sunk in the marshes along the Marit-sa River and the glory of the crusades of Frederick I Barbarossa has died away enveloped in the crickets' song. Alas, the hand of the

chronicler is merciless. It has written: "I decided to put everything, to writing first, in order to save from the darkness of oblivion the facts related to the history of the town of Plovdiv today and, second, to offer an insignificant part of what I owe at the altar of my homeland."

Somewhere back in the twelfth century and long after that Philippopolis unites forever its name with Venice, Genoa, Dubrovnik, the Russian principalities and the Mid-

dle East. Out of the ruins of the one-time temple built, as legend goes, by Ivan Asen himself in honour of St. Petka, after Lala Shakhin Pasha's shepherds, who conquered the town in 1364, past the sinister humps of the gallows, holding in its recesses the latent energy of so many generations of enslaved martyrs, the ancient town emerges from the abyss of suffering of the nineteenth century. For the first time the whole service resounds in Bulgarian above the heads of

the attending multitude at the Sveta Bogoroditsa Church on that twenty-fifth night of December 1859 which seems to have fallen from nowhere. Something magic is streaming down the vaults of the church, neither exultation nor joy but rather the anticipation for both. After some time Paisii, the bishop of Plovdiv will be exiled to the monasteries of Mount Athos. And nobody will ever learn the names of all the hundreds of Bulgarians who put their newly born sense

of duty, fulfilled duty, above the thought of the daily bread, disregarding price and suffering.

And once again, one after another in the movement of time, come to the fore Hristo Danov's words: "The only reason for all our evils, for all our misery is the dense and dark fog of our ignorance in which we are being led astray and stumble like blind men." You look at the faded under the touch of light photographs of the supporters of the

Bulgarian Gutenberg — refined and educated notables from Plovdiv and unlettered early proletarians. This town, never satisfied with itself, where nearly half of all the school and pedagogical literature in the National Revival Period has been published, still remembers the traces of the imposing presence of Dragan Manchov at whose printing house the first Bulgarian encyclopaedia of Luka Kasurov is to be published somewhat later. It is still reading haltingly

the alphabet at the Sveta Troitsa School founded in 1834 at the foot of Nebet tepe. At the beginning of October, 1850, hat in hand, Naiden Guerov, the schoolmaster, is meeting his students at the gates of the first eparchial school in Plovdiv under the proud sign-board Sveti Kiril i Metodii. Dr. Ivan Bogorov has summed up: "Plovdiv, from the point of view of education, is for the Bulgarians today what Paris is for the French and as a literary centre what Leipzig is for the

Germans." And all this — "for the benefit of the nation" — is the only self-interest of these unbelievable people, anonymous for the most part, pure and modest, the way real greatness is anonymous, pure and modest.

Do not smile at once, you, wise man! Try at least for a moment to descend to the unfathomable depths of the heart of a Bulgarian from that memorable time. It is certainly irrational and it will take a lot of emotion to grasp that it is

not the result but rather the burning aspiration after it, it is the faith rather than its incarnation that is important. And suffering is really in the category of the individual and all those men's cause is not the product of a magic wand but of the vast depth of a completely liberated mind in which the national awareness of the Bulgarian during the Revival find its true equivalent in this town and in the expanse of its essentially unique spiritual workshop.

Individual human life seems to be nameless and personal ambition is impossible outside of the impulses of the whole, here, at this world crossroad, the eternal meeting place of the gaily-coloured caravans of the merchants from Plovdiv who have explored every inch of the routes from Manchester to Leipzig and Vienna, from Odessa via Constantinople to Calcutta. Whose is the voice whispering: "Whom are you serving? What do you want to testify by this belated and inap-

propriate lithurgy, by this inept raving after the days gone by? Have you not found at least once enough strength to break away from their shadowy visions and having bypassed them to step across to the future?" "Everything is the world, an uncertain contemporary is seeking a footing, and the past and the future do not exist, it is only he, the living, the breathing man, that is the unique dimension of universal infinite time, and in writing about those days I am,

in fact, writing about myself.”
It is ever so simple and this is
why it is greater than anything
else, to live the way you
breathe...

Names, and names, and
people, and steps, steps in the
old town...

And above them, like a
handful of foam, unparalleled,
is Kuyumdjiev's house. And
the inscrutable mystery of
creation. In the soil under it,
maybe still intact, is the bottle
containing a bunch of basil
and a piece of parchment with

the words: "May Our Lord keep together these stones the way the hills of Phelibe are kept together. May He keep together all those present and those who will find this. May 21st, 1846." "Those who will find this...." — this is the prayer, the Bulgarian prayer of those dramatic times when self-abnegation is the only religion, and the union with immortality — its only apostle. But who can touch the spirit, that breath from heaven, built into the foundations, that voice

of a wise man calling from the depths: "I have given away everything, only joy has been left to me"? And how many more lives a man need to have in order to become aware of and accept his own self?

You can feel that a whole world has vanished very near you and you have never even suspected its presence. A world that is never going to be recreated along the former Suborna Street hiding the steps of the poet Lamartine, of the messengers of the secret

revolutionary committees, of Levski, Benkovski and Zahary Stoyanov, in the fragile silence of Rila Square at whose corner is the house where the second congress of Blagoev's party has taken place; or in the timid silence of Kiril Nektariev Street where the echo of the hours of the anti-fascist struggle has frozen still.

But, listen, the bell of Lazar Veleganov resounds over there at the hills. It sings "Ding-dong! Ding-dong!", the fog is dispersing and, oh, miracle! —

General Gurko dismounts his horse once again. "I do remember him...", the one-time attendant of the Consul Naiden Guerov is moved to tears...

"May long live the memory of those killed in battle"...

"For many years to come", the air is resounding, the vaults are groaning, bending, the horizon, deep like a well, is generous like the Slavs, the grass is low, the doors are open, and behind them you can see eyes in tears. They come and they go, and

they step forward once again
and they overwhelm
everything from everywhere,
they do not leave you alone,
hours and outlines of faces are
confused as if it was a wax-
work exhibition, known and
unknown, recent and past, an
enormous chaos, and invisible
alarmclocks are ticking and
their hands are moving...

...Names, names, and peo-
ple, and steps, steps in the old
town...

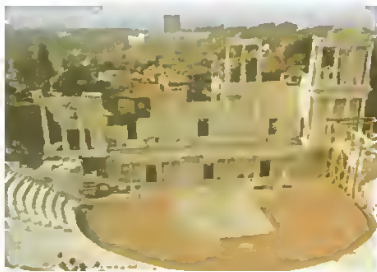
And amidst them here you

are, you, unknown friend, you, who are walking in the streets of the millenial Plovdiv, and what does it matter that somebody is whispering behind you: "Where are you speeding to ? Can't you see that of the life that has been thriving here only the cover is left, like the dead shells the sea throws on its shores?...

Yes, there is such a town, it breathes deep within us, a town of silence, a town which is coming from the depths of this infinite world and ascends

into our existence to step
across into the future, even
more unbelievable, closer and
unexpectedly sincere with
every minute.

Yordan VELCHEV









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